DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 060 CS 502 320

AUTHOR Curran, Trisha
TITLE "Kuleshov on Film": A Spectator-Centered Film Theory.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audiences; Auteurism; *Film Industry; *Film Production; *Film Production Specialists; Foreign Countries; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Kuleshov (Lev)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes some of the theories of cinematography of Soviet film theorist and filmmaker Lev Kuleshov. It points out that for him, film was communication portraying people's activities emanating from the environment. It explains that he was especially interested in audience response, particularly that of the proletariat, and that he felt that the effect of montage on the audience is extraordinary. The paper then compares Kuleshov with other filmmakers such as Pudovkin, Eisenstein, Metz, Munsterberg, Bazin, Bergman, and Fellini. It also conjectures what he would think about color, 3-D, and wide-screen films. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED168060

KULESHOV ON FILM

A SPECTATOR-CENTERED FILM THEORY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Trisha Curran

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Trisha Curran
Ohio State University

CS502320

Spectators were Kuleshov's primary intended audience for Art of the Cinema. He felt it was "vital" for them to know about the "culture of cinema," and the "methods and means of film structure" in order to be better able to see films, to sense them and to appraise them.

Spectators were likewise the determinants of Kuleshov's film theory and filmmaking. Through audience analysis he discovered "which techniques of filmmaking held the viewer," and "how we could make him sense what we had conceived." As late as 1935 he wrote: "At all events, one must study montage, one must work on montage, because it has an extraordinary effect on the viewer."[2]

He saw cinema as communication, film as language, the shot as sign or ideogram. Montage, movement, actor-mannequins and typage were all subordinate to this end.

Kuleshov's teaching, writing, theorizing and filmmaking spanned a half-century of Russian cinema. At the age of 20, he became an instructor in the first state film school, having previously directed documentaries under Lenin's orders. Using the newsreel format, and actor mannequins, he directed the first Soviet agit-film, On the Red Front.

His editing experiments are world famous - alternating a static shot of Mozhukhin with a bowl of soup, a

young girl and a child's coffin, for very different meanings; rearranging shots of an actor portraying joy on receiving his freedon, with satisfaction on receiving soup, for the same meanings.

In the foreword to Art of the Cinema, Pudovkin, Obolenski, Komarov and Fogel, wrote of Kuleshov's place in Russian cinema:

> In the past we had no cinematography, now we do. ... The establishment of that cinema developed from Kuleshov.. We make films - Kuleshov made cinematography. [3]

The interdependency between the material of the cinema and the methods of its organization, led Kuleshov to declare that cinema is more complicated than other art forms. For him the problem of art is to reflect reality, illuninating it with a particular idea, thus proving something.

Cinema portrays the people's activities resulting from class interrelationships. Thus stories are to emanate from the environment. Genuine film works must be structured on everyday circumstances, and use materials of everyday life. The roles must be actable, filmable and realistic.

Cinema can use only realistically existing or realistically arranged subjects. Theatrical imagining and supposing have no place in this art form of the real. Whereas an actor can fall down and play dead on the stage, in cinema a static frame must be photographed on movie film to produce a realistic dead man. Using such techniques, there are very

few things that cannot be transformed into actual, realistic events.

Kuleshov attributes the public's fascination with newsreels to the use of real material, and the fact that everything appears absolutely real. (He predicted that newsreels would flower with improved technology.) For him the fiction film is more challenging than the documentary recording of actuality, because the former infuses actuality with proletarian spirit. He also finds the contemporary cinema's proletarian spirit more interesting and worthwhile than the historical cinema's artiphotogenic material and harmful psychology.

The proletarian response to films was of particular interest to Kuleshov. Claiming that wealthier people go to films out of psychpathological or hysterical impulses, he concentrated his audience analysis on the less educated, more spontaneous moviegoers in the third balcony, and his structural analysis on the films they watched most attentively as well as the particular filmic moments which elicited laughs, sighs or groans, in order to determine the construction of the gripping films, and their response-provoking sections.

Observing an overwhelming preference for American films with 80-100 separate shots per section, followed by

European films with 20-30 and Russian with 10-15 (figures for 1916), he concluded that the "source of filmic impact upon the viewer lies within the system of alternating shots which comprise the motion picture," [4]

That the "material must be extremely simple and organized in order that everything filmed be seen, perceived and understood in a brief, given space of time." [5]

Thus, characteristics of a given structure must be emphasized in two or three details; the less noticeable set decor, the better it will assist the action. Backlighting should be used for clear, precise illumination and an illusion of stereoscopic depth, not for beautification (Rembrandtism). There should also be many variations, rather than repeats, of the shot. "The greater the director's choice in editing, the greater the sources of success with the spectator." [6]

The spectator is also the reason for montage: "One must work on montage because it has an extraordinary effect on the viewer." [7]

> With correct montage, even if one takes the performances of an actor directed at something quite different, it will still reach the viewer in the way intended by the editor, because the viewer will complete the sequence and see that which is suggested to him by montage. [8]

Montage also resides within the shots with the actor's

own montage curve, particularly in montage interactions and alterations -(cutting on movement)thus combining the internal montage of shot construction with the montage construction of the shots.

Montage for Kuleshov is the construction of whole phrases; the shot is a sign or ideogram. A complete conception, it should be instantly readable. Logic and economy rule out superfluous things or space. Canons of art photography are not applicable. "The point of view of shots and the nature of what is photographed depend not on trying to be original, nor on the mere desire for novelty no matter what, but on the organizing and technical problems of cinematography." [9]

In cinema, every viewer sees every shot from the same point of view, from where he is placed by the filmmaker shooting and editing the film. Thus cinema viewers are on a totally different base from theater viewers who, dependant on the broad gesture, see from various places in the theater.

Whereas in theater it is enough to represent an action, in film it must realistically occur. Stylization does not work. Film needs real material, rather than the pretense of reality. Therefore, types, not theater actors, should act in film. Types - people with "an exterior of character, a definite brightly expressive appearance." [10] To justify what he does, the film actor must have a corresponding appearance. He must also be able to alter his appearance by manipulating his muscles. That is, he

must be an actor-mannequin, "a person who is able to express any given assignment by the director with his entire body: his face, his hands, his trunk, his legs." "Higher and more complete" than the theatrical actor, the actor-mannequin is a "natural, real person as in life, but one who is able to do anything; not an obedient mannequin in the hands of the director." [11]

Each studio should have its own cadre of qualified actors, should keep albums of typage possibilities, and should only consider scenarios based on available talent.

For Kuleshov, pure action was the basis of the film scenario, and the labor process, the absolute material of cinematography.

> All work can be reduced to the establishment of various labor processes, since something is done with objects, violating or ordering their commonplace organizations, handling them either rationally or irrationally, the actor mannequin acts out the process of labor. [12]

Not only must actor mannequins perform precise and measured movements, such movements must fit into fundamental, metrical rhythms. For elementary action, the movement should parallel two sides of the screen and be perpendicular to the other two. For complex action, crooked movements are used.

The actor's space is a three dimensional, a pyramid whose apex rests against the center of the lens. He must thus construct his work along the basic axes or their com-

binations with the cubic space. The greater the complexity of the spacial grid, the longer it will take the viewer to "read" the scene. Thus railroad bridges and cityscapes are easier to read than landscapes.

Through montage, the viewer "reads" what the director wants him to read. Montage can create a new terrain, a new person; correct an actor's performance; change an actor's work, movement and behavior; show action from the point of view of the character; reveal the relation of parts to their organizing spacial-temporal connection.

Thus this "essence of cinema technique," inextricably tied to the world-view of the person who has the material at his disposal, has an enormous influence on the semantic comprehension of what is on the screen." [13]

Again, "at all events, one must study montage, one must work on montage, because it has an extraordinary effect on the viewer." [14]

Comparisons, Contrasts and Conjectures

Kuleshov's praise of Eisenstein as master of the shot, rather than of montage, is interesting. So too is his complaint that Pudovkin lost touch with actors because of his primary preoccupation with montage. Both remarks evidence Kuleshov's concern with the shot-signs and the actor-mannequins. All three Russian, Soviet theorists see the cinema as a means of propaganda and communication. (Metz will later argue that it is not communication, because it is one-sided)

In his pre-Metzian, primitively-semiotic structuralism, Kuleshov equated the shot with the sign and the ideogram (a term Eisenstein also used). Metz would later view it on the level of the statement. Both Kuleshov and Metz labored to find the cinematic within the filmic. And both recognized certain codes, eg. Kuleshov's discussion of the specific meaning of the iris effect.

Like Munsterberg, Kuleshov's film theory is spectator-centered and fiction-film based. Whereas Munsterberg's approach is psychological, Kuleshov's is structuralist.

Both Bazin and Kuleshov hold that things should appear real on the screen. However Bazinian realism was based on deep focus, whereas Kuleshov's was accomplished

through montage. Bazin provided for ambiguity, Kuleshov for propaganda.

Unlike the neorealists whom Bazin praised, Kuleshov was against showing present poverty in films emanating from everyday life, believing that accomplished goals were more effective in influencing the viewer to overcome present obstacles. (A possible influence of the "this is the way life should be" aspect of Hollywood films?)

With the auteur theorists, Kuleshov felt that a director's work should be distinct. Similar to Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini, he had a cadre of actors for whom scenarios were written.

Although granting that the greater the director's experience, the more restricted his material can be, Kuleshov was basically pro-movement and anti-psycologism. Thus he would not approve of Bergman's and Antonioni's films. His demand for order, and his championship of continuity cutting are not sympathetic to Godard. Nor is his insistance that the actor-mannequins are not puppets of the director, sympathetic to Hitchcock. These are all conjectures. Kuleshov does not condemn anyone. He praises Chaplin's Woman of Paris for use of labor processes, and American films for montage.

Additional conjectures...Kuleshov would probably approve of color, based on its appeal to the masses, and its possibilities for greater realistic appearances. He was quite innovative in his early use of sound in Horizon, using only motivated music. Already using lighting to achieve the appearance of three dimensionality, Kuleshov would probably support 3-D. His theory of movement in cinema would support widescreen, as could his theory of American montage. However, widescreen does not seem compatible with Russian montage.

Returning to the basis of his theory, the effect of particular techniques upon the viewer, one might argue that Kuleshov would approve of those effects which best communicated his message to the viewer, which most effectively moved the viewer. "At all events, one must study montage, one must work on montage, because it has an extraordinary effect on the viewer."

NOTES

1. Lev Kuleshov, Kuleshov on Film. Ronald Levaco, editor. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974),p.42
2. p. 195
3. p. 41
4. p. 47
5. p. 58
6. p. 118
7. p. 195
8. p. 54
9. p. 81
10. p. 64
11. p. 209
12. p. 145
13. p. 185
14. p. 195